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# FIT FIX

## How data-driven sizing firms are taking on denim.

**words**_____JESSICA BINNS

**Nadia Boujarwah understands** the importance of fit more than most. The Dia & Co. co-founder and CEO falls into the "10-to-16" size range where anything from a medium to an XL might work for her silhouette, depending on the clothing brand. Trying to figure out the "what size am I?" question when it comes to denim is "just really hard," she said.

After launching the New York company in 2015 to help women wearing sizes 14-32 shop fashion from their favorite brands, Boujarwah catapulted the e-commerce startup forward in January when True Fit's technology arrived on Dia's denim-dominated product pages where jeans make up 25 percent of the overall assortment, depending on the season. That implementation came after Dia in 2020 broadened its original curated subscription-box model to include a marketplace where "brands work directly with customers" and consumers can shop à la carte, she said.

If fit is a problem for fashion as a whole, it's only that much more maddening on the plus end of the sizing spectrum. "Generally speaking, fit challenges are amplified in an inclusive fashion context," Boujarwah said. "And so, we have really invested in addressing fit from as many kinds of angles as possible." She echoed a common refrain in conversations around fit, namely that what consumers want from their clothing is "both subjective and objective."

Fit and sizing technology are gaining prominence not only because more consumer dollars are migrating online but also because deep pockets don't guarantee that a brand will nail how garments, and especially denim, work for a variety of bodies, according to Boujarwah, who credits Dia's two years of marketplace insights for shedding light on the sizing struggle.

"Brands independently have an exceptionally hard time designing, manufacturing and selling in the plus-size community," she said of the biggest learnings from Dia's marketplace debut. "I think the news from Old Navy, for example, is one incarnation of this, where even very large retailers have trouble succeeding in what should be a very large market for most companies." In May, Gap Inc. CEO Sonia Syngal said Old Navy "overestimated" in-store demand for its size-inclusive Bodequality launch, leading the company to pull "select extended sizes" from 90 U.S. and Canadian stores.

Companies large and small are throwing data and technology at the problem, and both ready-to-wear and made-to-measure brands are investing in solutions for front- and back-end success.

### CONFIDENCE AROUND QUALITY

For Boujarwah, True Fit's first-mover status as one of the OGs of fit tech works in its favor.

"The fact that they have been in the market for as long as they have been had a really important benefit to us, which is that they had much more plus-sized data that gave us confidence around the quality of the recommendations and the value that it would add to our customers in a way that I think is pretty unique," she said, referencing the Boston company's 2009 origins and work with 150 global retail sites and 17,000 brands.

Plus, True Fit has its roots in denim, said co-founder Jessica Murphy, who agrees that jeans are far and away the "hardest-to-fit category."

"This is rocket science—it actually is," she quipped. The company's data scientists are solving for all of the factors culminating in that elusive "'wow' moment when you put on a pair of jeans and you turn around" to admire the rear view, she said.

But tackling those manifold factors is no small feat. In many ways, True Fit's 13-year evolution mirrors e-commerce's decade-plus growth spurt. "When we first started the company, we felt like to get it right you needed to have this long questionnaire and ask every question under the sun" to gather every bit of minutiae on a consumer's measurements and fit preferences, Murphy said. That might work for the "1 percent of the population" with the time to submit to a full interrogation, but now the company is focused on a solution that "works for the masses." What True Fit "underestimated early on" is that fit "really isn't a math problem," she said of the company's movement away from a solution that asks shoppers to reach for the measuring tape.

> "Jeans are the foundation for a type of wardrobe relationship with your customers that's hard to find outside of denim."
>
> —NADIA BOUJARWAH, DIA & CO.

"We're going to point you in the right direction and hopefully weed out a lot of the [jeans] that are going to drive you to tears in the dressing room," Murphy said.

True Fit's "lightweight" approach accounts for why 80 million registered users have engaged with the technology. Tell us which brands you wear and enjoy and in what sizes, and we'll steer you toward labels that fit similarly well, it promises. The familiar red-and-white True Fit logo now lives on the digital pages of denim powerhouses including Madewell, Neiman Marcus, 7 For All Mankind, Pacsun and JCPenney.

It's that value across the broader fashion e-ecommerce system that especially resonated with Dia. "The way that True Fit presents their recommendation and in reality follows people through their shopping journeys on the internet is really intuitive to customers," Boujarwah said, pointing to what is likely a familiar fit-finding experience that many consumers have already engaged with on other sites, meaning the barrier to engagement is low. Six months into working with True Fit, 7 percent of Dia customers have interacted with the user-friendly widget.

## CUSTOM CACHET

The fit tech sector is growing—and expansive enough for both the big dogs and the new kids on the block.

Bold Metrics' $8 million funding round in May is a testament to fashion's appetite for high-tech solutions to fit. The San Francisco startup's technology leverages artificial intelligence to capture a consumer's body measurement and connect that intel to clothing data and spit out the size most likely to result in a satisfied sale. This approach guides shoppers on the best size from participating brands and "how a particular ready-to-wear size would fit across critical points of measure," said CEO Daina Burnes, who founded the company in 2012.

Without Bold Metrics, Blue Delta Jeans wouldn't be able to scale its direct-to-consumer business, said Tyler Sutliff, an investor and operating partner at the Oxford, Miss. denim company where $450 made-to-measure raw denim jeans come in straight, boot, "fashion boot" and skinny silhouettes manufactured down the road in Tupelo.

In many ways, fit tech has laid the groundwork for the next phase of Blue Delta's growth. Not only did Bold Metrics allow the denim company's tailors to put aside their



physical measuring tape, but giving consumers confidence around the accuracy of its fit means Blue Delta can spread its wings into new categories. Bold Metrics, Sutliff said, "opened the door to future product rollouts beyond custom jeans and cotton pants."

"We are good at making custom jeans and pants and those lines will always be the core of our business, but with customer sizing data we can offer our customers other apparel options down the road," he said, pointing to a custom belt rollout on deck for summer 2022.

A "teachable moment" is one way to describe how Blue Delta's experience learning from Bold Metrics translates into showing denim shoppers what's possible, he added.

"The 'opportunity' for Blue Delta in the denim world is to educate people that they do not need to settle for an off-the-rack jean made thousands of times over in a garment factory overseas," Sutliff said of the value of a customized product that takes fit worries of the equation. Blue Delta's old-meets-new tactics create a wholly different experience. "While our sizing technology is high tech, our customer service model is old school, high touch and rooted in Southern hospitality—the result is happy customers in perfect-fitting jeans," he added.

UpWest, the sustainability- and wellness-focused millennial label Express Inc. launched in 2019, credits fit tech for addressing one of its biggest pain points as a new brand: "making sure new customers understand the fit of our products," said Cory Uehlein, digital activation and analytics associate at the Columbus, Ohio-based firm, which sells a full assortment of dual-gender apparel in addition to what it bills as "all day" denim and unisex styles.

"Our purpose is to provide comfort, which goes into making sure the customer has the appropriate fit they desire," Uehlein noted, adding, "We want to make sure that every customer is confident in the size they purchase." UpWest has seen a drop in returns relating to poor fit in the wake of the Bold Metrics integration, he said.

You can also expect to hear the name Bodidata in the years ahead. The "measure, match and manage" company's patented Kora body scanner includes an optical sensor and millimeter wave radar technology—what the Transportation Security Administration uses in airport scanners screening millions of airline passengers each year. The St. Petersburg, Fla. company launched in 2017 with an initial focus on uniforms—for a very good reason, said co-founder and CEO Tuoc Luong.

Starting in the uniform sector has allowed Bodidata to prove its technology works, he said. "There's no opting out" when an employer requires employees to be scanned and fitted for the clothing they'll wear from 9 to 5. "We wanted a captive audience initially," which is critical for building out a broad data set of real-world bodies versus carefully selected fit models while maintaining data privacy.

And that means Bodidata can hit the ground running when it finally goes after vertically integrated apparel retailers in 2023. Those conversations can start right off the bat with the data from the thousands or millions of the workers—ie, consumers—who've already been scanned "without doing anything with your customer base," Luong said.

Bodidata is already tiptoeing into the space, with a pair of test pilots scanning pupils for Lands' End school uniforms that could blossom into a broader rollout with the Wisconsin clothing company "if it works out well," Luong said.

## A FITTING FOUNDATION

"Style sampling is fine, but not when we know that the thing that you just bought is never going to work for you," she said. "Our goal is if you're going to buy five things, let those be successful things. Hopefully you're picking from five great things, not four that might fit you awful, and one that works."

And for Dia, getting denim right can translate into stronger business across the board, underscoring the importance of helping customers make the right decision at checkout.

"One of the reasons why denim ends up being so important is because once you find denim that fits you, it's one of the categories of apparel that drives more loyalty than almost anything else," Boujarwah said. Dia is "very happy" to invest in steering customers toward their best fit because "jeans are the foundation for a type of wardrobe relationship with your customers" that's hard to find outside of denim, she said.



Dia & Co.